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AUTHOR	Spence, Janet G.
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ABSTRACT

Globalization of the economy and rapid technological innovation challenge today's work force to prepare for continuous change. In response to a strong mandate from their membership, labor unions have formed partnerships to deliver the necessary worker education. Because they are in daily contact with workers and have a holistic knowledge of individual workers' needs, labor unions are in an excellent position to provide worker education. To meet the work force's education needs effectively, however, unions must form new partnerships with management, community organizations, and statutory bodies. One of the most dramatic changes in labor union-sponsored work force education is its broad scope. Many employee development programs now seek to promote workplace learning beyond firms' narrowly defined business interests. This broad-based learning addresses the challenge of turning novices into experts. Literacy issues underlie many educational initiatives. Labor-sponsored, worker-centered learning programs are democratic in structure and involve discussion facilitators who use a wide variety of exercises and activities to encourage participatory learning. Many labor unions are taking a hard line on educational equity issues and focusing on low-paid, low-status, or female employees. Increasing educational access for these union members means eliminating physical barriers to educational participation. (Contains 19 references.) (MN)

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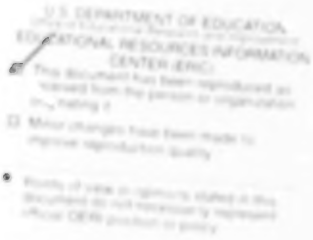
Janet G. Spence



ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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by Janet G. Spence

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Worker-Centered Learning: Labor's Role

Labor unions have supported education and training for their members since the late 19th century (Hensley 1993). Recent decades have seen a decline in union membership, while at the same time workplace learning has skyrocketed in importance. Drawing on a number of international and national references, this Digest explores the labor movement's new vision for workers' education. This new educational vision of labor unions is based on the belief that worker-centered learning can contribute both to individual development and the economic viability of the organization.

Lifelong Learning and the Role of Labor Unions

The globalization of the economy and rapid technological innovation challenge today's work force to prepare for continuous change. Due to technological innovation and the restructuring of the workplace, many workers have found that their current technical skills are obsolete. Furthermore, international corporate competitiveness has become more dependent on the problem-solving abilities of the workers. To address these problems, members of the work force must commit themselves to lifelong learning to update their technical skills and develop their problem-solving skills (Inman and Vernon 1997; Payne 1997; Rowden 1996).

Due to a strong mandate from their membership, labor unions have formed partnerships to deliver the necessary worker education (Dowdell 1997; Workers' Education Association 1998a,b). Labor unions are in an excellent position to provide this service since they are in daily contact with workers and have a holistic knowledge of the individual workers' needs (Watts and Ford 1998). However, labor unions must form new partnerships with management, community organizations and statutory bodies to meet the work force's education needs effectively (Workers' Education Association 1998a,b). The success of these partnerships depends on both interpersonal factors such as trust and commitment and on appropriate structures to share the administration of the educational programs. In order to legitimize their right to introduce worker-driven themes into educational programming, labor unions must also be willing to share the costs of the work force's education with management and community organizations (Dassinger 1997).

Holistic Education

One of the most dramatic changes in labor union-sponsored work force education is its broad scope. Although traditional applied technical education is still offered, liberal educational programs emphasizing personal development are assuming greater importance (Workers' Education Association 1998b). Many employee development programs now seek to promote workplace learning beyond the narrowly defined business interests of the firm. This trend is in response to the need for autonomous employees in an information-rich production environment. It is a recognition of the symbiotic relationship between personal development, community development, and vocational training (Payne 1997).

This broad-based learning addresses the challenge of turning novices into experts. Contrary to popular opinion, the difference between novices and experts is not their technical knowledge, but the way they approach a problem. Experts may be identified by their ability to categorize problems correctly, compile procedures and chunk concepts, diagnose problems, select effective solution strategies, and monitor problem solutions (Billett 1998). To develop workers' abilities to deal with problems, labor union learning programs must deal with academic, personal management, and teamwork skills (MacKenzie 1997).

Underlying many educational initiatives are literacy issues. Production workers who lack basic skills such as basic reading and writing proficiency are likely to be excluded from the management sponsored skills training programs (Dassinger 1997). In addition, workers who have less than a high school education and speak English as a second language are most severely affected by layoffs (MacKenzie 1997). However, union literacy initiatives are hampered by the stigma currently associated with basic skills training programs. One approach to dealing with this stigma is using different terms such as communications or foundation skills to describe literacy courses. Another approach to dealing with the stigma of literacy education is incorporating basic skills training into more technical educational programs (Dowdell 1997).

Collaborative and Cooperative Learning

Labor-sponsored, worker-centered learning programs are democratic in structure. Studies show that learner involvement increases learning efficiency while enhancing the learner's critical thinking, collaborative skills, and personal development (Jurmo 1992). For this reason, much of the learning takes place through small-group discussion. Within the discussion, questioning by the facilitator and peers helps learners clarify their own thinking process and build basic concepts (Schied et al. 1994).

Discussion facilitators use a wide variety of exercises and activities to encourage participatory learning. For example, in the language experience approach, learners are encouraged to put ideas into their own words. Another teaching technique, student-generated role plays, is designed to help learners bridge the gap between classrooms and real life (Estes 1997). Other techniques to increase learner participation include guided reading and thinking aloud (Schied et al. 1994).

Educational Access Issues

The concept of equity in the workplace is based on the mythical notion of a "level playing field." Most past efforts to ensure equity in the workplace have been procedural rather than substantive. However, ultimately it is not possible to legislate equity completely. It is also necessary to eliminate the barriers to equity, so that educational equity means not only equal access but equal ability to participate (Butler 1998).

Many labor unions are taking a hard line on educational equity issues and focusing on low-paid, low status, or female employees (Lundy 1998; Workers' Education Association 1998b). Training for female union members is of particular concern since training is viewed as a key to breaking the glass ceiling in union leadership (Lundy 1998). Increasing educational access for these union members means eliminating physical barriers to educational participation. Childcare and transportation issues may be handled by providing stipends or services (Estes 1997). Additional incentives to participate in educational programs may be provided by making them

apply toward some long-term goal by granting credits toward a degree or continuing education credits (Lundy 1998). In the future, to equalize educational access unions must negotiate employee education development funds and paid educational leave for ordinary workers into labor contracts (Spencer 1996). Also, increased use of technology for individualized studies will take learning to a more geographically and socioeconomically diverse population (Lundy 1998, Spencer 1996, Workers' Education Association 1998a).

Conclusion

Labor unions have increased their commitment to work force education in response to workplace and societal demands. The new broad-based approach to labor union worker education is expected to have a positive impact on both the workers' personal lives as well as the economic success of the company. By taking a broader perspective on worker education, union educational programs are no longer involved solely in vocational education, but have expanded to include transformational education for their members. This transformational education supports the underpinnings of our civil society (Workers' Education Association 1998c).

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CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 Kenny Road • Columbus, Ohio 43210-1090